

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Digital Repository

Natural Resource Ecology and Management
Publications

Natural Resource Ecology and Management

2011

First Record of a Comb Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos sulvicola*) for Costa Rica

Stephen J. Dinsmore

Iowa State University, cootjr@iastate.edu

Tyler Harms

Iowa State University, harmesy@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/nrem_pubs



Part of the [Natural Resources Management and Policy Commons](#), and the [Ornithology Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/nrem_pubs/89. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Natural Resource Ecology and Management at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resource Ecology and Management Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

First Record of a Comb Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos sulvicola*) for Costa Rica

Abstract

The authors, in company with Rafael Ramirez and a group of Iowa State University students, observed, photographed, and documented a male Comb Duck of the South American subspecies (*Sarkidiornis melanotos sylvicola*) at the large drying wetland in Palo Verde National Park, Costa Rica on 18 March 2010. The bird was present the following day and last reported 25 March 2010. The record is supported by photographs and becomes the first for Costa Rica and northernmost in the Western Hemisphere.

Keywords

Comb Duck, Costa Rica, Western Hemisphere, vagrancy

Disciplines

Natural Resources Management and Policy | Ornithology

Comments

This article is from *North American Birds* 65 (2011): 362. Posted with permission.

First record of Comb Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*) for Costa Rica

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE • TYLER M. HARMS • DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCE ECOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT, 339 SCIENCE II
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY, AMES, IOWA 50011 • (EMAIL: COOTJR@IASTATE.EDU) • (EMAIL: TYHARMS@GMAIL.COM)



Figure 1. Adult male Comb Duck at the Palo Verde National Park wetlands, Costa Rica, 18 March 2010. The iridescent green tones in the upperwing coverts and the very large “comb” on the bill indicate an adult male. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore.

Abstract

The authors, in company with Rafael Ramirez and a group of Iowa State University students, observed, photographed, and documented a male Comb Duck of the South American subspecies (*Sarkidiornis melanotos sylvicola*) at the large drying wetland in Palo Verde National Park, Costa Rica on 18 March 2010. The bird was present the following day and last reported 25 March 2010. The record is supported by photographs and becomes the first for Costa Rica and northernmost in the Western Hemisphere.

Field encounter and identification

On the morning of 18 March 2010, the authors, along with park naturalist Rafael

Ramirez and a group of Iowa State University students, took a morning hike to the last remaining depression of water near the north-central part of the Palo Verde lagoon in Palo Verde National Park, Costa Rica. Mid-March is near the end of the local dry season, although this wetland was drier than it had been in mid-March of 2006 or 2008 (pers. obs.).

We reached the edge of the water at approximately 0635 local time. Many waterbirds were circling the wetland, and we began sifting through the hundreds of herons and waterfowl present. At 0645, we were watching a small flock of Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) when a large, dark duck caught our eye. The bird made several sweeping passes overhead at a distance of

less than 50 m before landing out of sight in a distant wetland opening.

The duck was quite large, dwarfing the teal and appearing slightly larger than several nearby Muscovy Ducks (*Cairina moschata*). The wings, mantle, and rectrices were black, and upon closer inspection, we noted that the upperwing coverts were iridescent green in good light. The sides and flanks were also black with considerable white mottling around the sides but not the flanks. The head was white with faint black mottling, especially on the crown and nape. The breast, belly, and vent were white and lacked noticeable darker mottling. The bill was dark gray with a distinct, rounded plate rising vertically from the base of the bill to near its tip to a height equal to the top of the crown. The legs were also dark gray. None of us had any prior field experience with this species, but we recognized it in the field as a Comb Duck and later confirmed the identification from online resources. The presence of the distinctive “comb” on the bill, for which the species is named, its large size, and the iridescent green sheen in the upperwing coverts indicate the bird was an adult male (Todd 1997). The more solidly black flanks, lacking any iridescent color, indicated that it was of the expected South America subspecies *sylvicola*. Some authorities have suggested that the South American subspecies and nominate subspecies of Comb Duck are best considered two distinct species (Livezey 1997, Callaghan 2005).

During the period of observation, through 0755, we obtained several photographs of the bird in flight (Figures 1-3). We returned on 19 March and re-found the bird from 0605 through 0625. It was last reported on 25 March 2010 (Jones and Komar 2010).

Vagrancy in Comb Ducks

The provenance of any extralimital waterfowl species can be debated because many are kept in captivity, occasionally escape, and subsequently consort with other waterfowl and assume a “wild” appearance. Although we cannot know for certain, we believe this bird was

most likely a genuine vagrant for two reasons. First, we saw no obvious signs of a captive history during our observations of the bird; it was not wearing bands or other obvious marks, it seemed as wild and wary as any of the other waterfowl present, and it occurred on a date and at a location consistent with a wild bird that might have wandered to Central America. The timing of the sighting in March, near the end of the dry season, is consistent with this species' habit of dispersal to areas of water during dry periods (Todd 1997). Second, the timing of the record was consistent with an emerging pattern of northward vagrancy in this species. Neighboring Panama has two records, both from March: up to 5 were present (and one collected), from late March through 21 May 1949 at La Jagua in the eastern part of Panamá Province (Wetmore 1965), and one was collected on 27 March 1959 at the mouth of Río Tuquesa in Darién Province (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). Long-distance dispersal in excess of 3000 kilometers has been documented for this species in Africa, but the South American subspecies is believed to be more sedentary (Todd 1997). For Comb Ducks, the breeding season is triggered by spring rains, breeding occurs during and immediately after the wet season, and post-breeding dispersal is driven by the amount and distribution of wetlands during the dry season (Todd 1997). The closest core breeding areas for Comb Ducks are in Colombia and Venezuela (estimated at 40,000 birds in the 1990s; Todd 1997), where the timing of the wet season (roughly May to November) could explain winter-season dispersal toward an area like the Palo Verde lagoon.

This represents the first record of Comb Duck for Costa Rica and the northernmost record in the Americas.

Acknowledgments

We thank Rafael Ramirez and the staff of the Organization for Tropical Studies for facilitating access to Palo Verde National Park. George Angehr kindly provided information on vagrant Comb Ducks in Panama, and W. Ross Silcock helped us locate references for this species in South America.

Literature cited

- Callaghan, C. 2005. South American Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis sylvicola*. In: Kear, J. (ed.) *Ducks, Geese, and Swans*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Jones, H. L., and O. Komar. 2010. The spring migration: Central America. *North American Birds* 64: 507-510.
- Livezey, B. C. 1997. A phylogenetic classification of waterfowl (Aves: Anseriformes), including selected fossil species. *Annals of Carnegie Museum* 66: 457-496.
- Ridgely, R. S., and J. A. Gwynne. 1989. *A Guide to the Birds of Panama*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Todd, F. S. 1997. *Natural History of the Waterfowl*. Ibis Publishing, Temecula, California.
- Wetmore, A. 1965. *The Birds of the Republic of Panamá. Part 1. Tinamidae (Tinamous) to Rynchopidae (Skimmers)*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 150: 1-483. 🌐



Figures 2, 3. Adult male Comb Duck at the Palo Verde National Park wetlands, Costa Rica, 18 March 2010. The solidly blackish flanks indicate the South American subspecies *sylvicola*. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore.